

Lithuania declares formal independence from Moscow

By Quentin Peel and John Parker in Moscow

The Soviet republic of Lithuania last night declared its formal restoration of independence from the Soviet Union.

At the same time it appealed to western governments to confirm their recognition of its status as an independent state which was never legally incorporated into the USSR.

The republican parliament approved in principle a declaration that read: "The Supreme Soviet of Lithuania, expressing the will of the people, resolves and proudly proclaims that the sovereign rights of the former Lithuanian state, occupied in 1940, are now reborn." Members of parliament - renamed the Supreme Council instead of the Supreme Soviet by the declaration - supported the declaration by 124 to none, with six abstentions.

The move amounts to a fundamental challenge to Mr Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet leader, at a time when he is already struggling to impose his authority on a rebellious Communist Party and force through the creation of an executive presidency to stop the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself.

It comes on top of a comparable move to demand outright independence from the southern republic of Georgia, and rapid steps in that direction from the neighbouring Baltic republic of Estonia.

The Lithuanian parliament had already showed its determination to press for independence yesterday by electing Mr Vytautas Landsbergis as president of the assembly, and therefore of the republic - the first non-Communist to hold such a post in the Soviet Union. Mr Landsbergis, a 57-year old professor of 20th-cen-



Demonstrators wait outside the Lithuanian parliament in Vilnius for the result of a vote on whether the country should resume its independence from the Soviet Union

tury Lithuanian musical history, is the leader of the independence movement Sajudis.

He was elected by 99 votes to 42 in a contest with Mr Algirdas Brazauskas, leader of the independent Lithuanian Communist Party, in the first test

of wills between Sajudis and the local party which declared its own independence from Moscow last year by breaking with the ranks of the Communist party of the Soviet Union.

Mr Brazauskas' refusal to bow to Mr Gorbachev's

demands that the party retain its links with the CPSU has made him the most popular political figure in the republic. But it was not enough to prevent the party's landslide defeat at Sajudis's hands during

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ing the recent elections to the local parliament.

The Supreme Soviet also rubbed salt in the wound of its independence resolution by changing the name of the "Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania" to the plain "Republic of Lithuania."

The newly elected deputies also ceremoniously tore from the walls of their chamber the official emblem of Soviet power - "the red one," according to a Sajudis spokesman. This will be later replaced by a knight on horseback.

Central Soviet television reported last night that the Lithuanian Council of Ministers had also given up its

authority.

It sent a resolution to the Supreme Soviet declaring that "no other constitution except the Lithuanian constitution has any power."

Mr Landsbergis offered his defeated rival one of the posts of vice-chairman of the Supreme Soviet.

But Mr Brazauskas turned it down and all three vice-chairmen are now leading members of Sajudis.

Sajudis backed-candidates controls two thirds of the seats in the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet - a majority large enough to force through the constitutional changes needed to declare independence.